TECHNICAL NOTE ON ADOLESCENT GIRLS' EMPOWERMENT THROUGH LIFE SKILLS IN THE GLOBAL PROGRAMME TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

The purpose of this technical note is:

1 To facilitate the exchange of knowledge and good practices on adolescent girls' empowerment through life skills

2 To provide practical guidance on the application of key concepts and effective programming approaches

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Global Programme to End Child Marriage (the 'Global Programme') aims to achieve catalytic effects, and works with many partners to advocate for and support practical actions to end child marriage and promote gender equality and the empowerment of adolescent girls.

This technical note builds on the technical note on gender-transformative approaches;[1] it promotes a common understanding of key concepts and provides practical guidance on how to promote adolescent girls' empowerment through life skills, including comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). This note is evidence based and informed by promising practices from the Global Programme and its partners and allies. For further reading, please refer to the technical note on life skills programmes for empowering adolescent girls: notes for practitioners on what works.[2]

DEFINING CONCEPTS AND APPROACHES:

What does adolescent empowerment mean?

Empowerment is not an end point or a fixed state, but a process of change.[3]

It is a personal journey through which adolescent girls or boys develop a clear and evolving understanding of themselves in the world, accompanied by increasing agency (ability to make choices that will impact their lives) and assets (e.g. physical and mental assets, social networks, financial assets, skills, time).[4] Empowered adolescents recognize their inherent worth and the fundamental equality of men and women, boys and girls. They critically examine their lives and the inequalities in their societies. They participate civically and make personal and public choices to act for the improvement of their lives and their world.

Empowerment is the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability. This implies having material, social and human **resources** to make strategic **choices**, and the ability to exercise **agency**, participation, voice and negotiation in decision-making, in order to gain achievements or meaningful improvements in life and well-being.[5]

Empowerment also involves transforming the structures, institutions and norms that can reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and inequality.[6]

Adolescent girls' empowerment and life skills, and child marriage

Phase II of the Global Programme will continue to centre life skills and CSE as a key strategy to strengthen girls' agency and voice and offer alternative choices to child marriage.[7] Life skills and CSE are delivered as two complementary approaches under the Global Programme, often overlapping in implementation and sometimes separate within school and out-of-school settings.[8]

While both adolescent girls and boys experience challenges in making life choices, including about marriage, girls continue to face increased socio-economic barriers and vulnerability. Life skills, when effectively delivered, can be considered a powerful tool for achieving adolescent empowerment.[9] The technical note on gender-transformative approaches[10] notes that programmes that help girls to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, that build their sense of personal worth and agency, and that teach them to interact with others constructively and effectively, have transformative potential. In fact, different types of skills have been shown to reinforce each other. For example,

an adolescent girl with good social skills is more likely to apply herself to acquiring cognitive skills, as well as to have positive relationships in her life.[11] Thus, even though personal empowerment is considered an outcome of implementing life skills, it is also a process that can facilitate achievement of cognitive and social skills (e.g. making informed choices, setting plans and goals, and communicating, collaborating and/or negotiating), which are necessary to achieve transformational change.[12]

> **Empowered adolescents recognize their inherent worth and the fundamental equality of men and women, boys and girls. They critically examine their lives and the inequalities in their societies.**

How to promote adolescent girls' empowerment through life skills?

While adolescent girls' empowerment should be promoted across the socio-ecological model, this technical note focuses specifically on developing life skills at the individual level through the provision of diverse skill sets.[13] Life skills are defined as "a large group of psychosocial and interpersonal skills that can help people make informed decisions, communicate effectively, and develop coping and self-management skills that may help lead a healthy and productive life."[14]

An approach to transformative life skills programmes for adolescent girls includes eight elements embedded into programme design, implementation and community grounding (see Figure 1).

All of the eight elements represent areas of intervention for adolescent girls to benefit from life skills programmes, targeting the girls themselves, their communities and gatekeepers, alongside making links to key referral services.

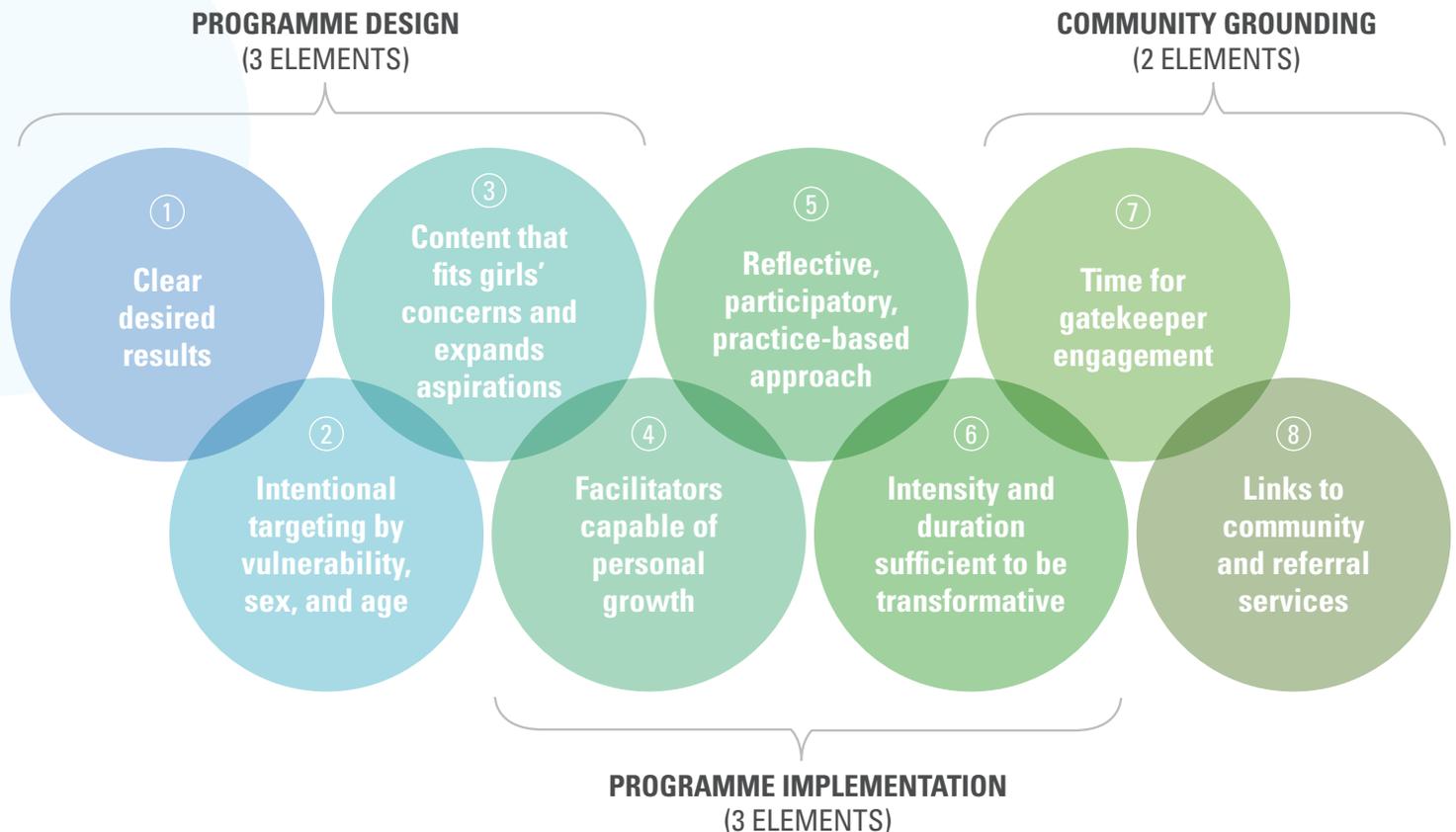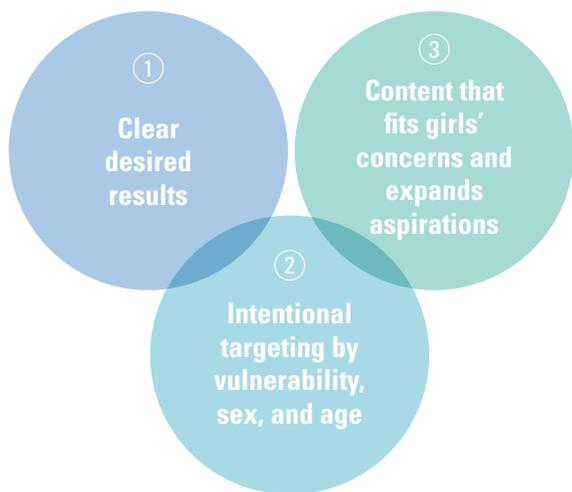**FIGURE 1: An approach to transformative life skills programmes for adolescent girls**[15]

PROGRAMME DESIGN
(3 ELEMENTS)

COMMUNITY GROUNDING
(2 ELEMENTS)

① **Clear desired results**

③ **Content that fits girls' concerns and expands aspirations**

⑤ **Reflective, participatory, practice-based approach**

⑦ **Time for gatekeeper engagement**

② **Intentional targeting by vulnerability, sex, and age**

④ **Facilitators capable of personal growth**

⑥ **Intensity and duration sufficient to be transformative**

⑧ **Links to community and referral services**

PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION
(3 ELEMENTS)

FIGURE 2: **Programme design elements**

Clear desired results ①

Content that fits girls' concerns and expands aspirations ③

Intentional targeting by vulnerability, sex, and age ②

The programme design elements (see Figure 2) aim to:

① Identify clear desired results around medium- or long-term aims for adolescents beyond the life skills modules, in order to amplify changes in institutions, relationships, services and policies, and influence the enabling environment.[16]

② Apply intentional targeting of specific adolescents by vulnerability, sex and age through an intersectional lens and through an explicit strategy to enable their meaningful participation. This can include paying attention to the ways in which gender intersects with age, race, caste, class, ability, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, etc.[17] It may also include the targeting of boys where appropriate.[18]

③ Design content that fits girls' concerns, expands aspirations and reflects their lives, especially through acknowledging imbalances of power in girls' relationships and how, realistically, girls will apply the skills in practice.[19]

FIGURE 3: **Programme implementation elements**

Reflective, participatory, practice-based approach ⑤

Facilitators capable of personal growth ④

Intensity and duration sufficient to be transformative ⑥

The programme implementation elements (see Figure 3) aim to:

④ Identify facilitators/mentors capable of personal growth, who are trustworthy and can be non-judgemental and encouraging, and who can challenge old ways of thinking and model new ones.[20]

⑤ Ensure that learning methods are reflective and participatory, encouraging processes of personal reflection, practice of new skills, and the application of skills to real-life examples. Monitoring the quality of mentorship and facilitation should be ongoing.[21]

⑥ Ensure that intensity and duration are sufficient to be transformative, with frequent regular sessions (e.g. weekly) to allow for in-depth discussions and repeated practice of skills.[22]

FIGURE 4: **Community-grounding elements**

Time for gatekeeper engagement ⑦

Links to community and referral services ⑧

The community-grounding elements (see Figure 4) aim to:

⑦ Allocate sufficient time for regular gatekeeper and stakeholder engagement (two to six months for teachers, parents, leaders, etc.) at the beginning of and throughout the programme to allow these groups to provide input on the scope and structure of the programme, and as an opportunity to influence them directly.[23]

⑧ Identify links to community and referral services (health, education, legal, livelihoods, banking, businesses, etc.) to meet girls' needs and rights that the programme cannot address directly, linking with other non-governmental organizations and service providers.[24]

MEASURING EMPOWERMENT THROUGH LIFE SKILLS

Measuring adolescent girls' empowerment, as both a process and an outcome that is sustained over time, is challenging and not yet well researched.[25]

Proxy indicators have been used to quantify intermediate programme results that link delayed marriage to different dimensions of empowerment within the ecological model, such as increased critical consciousness and awareness of human rights, self-efficacy, problem-solving skills, physical and mental health outcomes, social network and relationship building at the community level, skills for employment, access to financial resources, ownership of physical assets, and educational outcomes.[26]

While many programmes use indicators such as measurement of skill sets, it is important to focus on how girls use these skills within the context of their gendered relationships and positions in family and society.[27]

EVIDENCE-BASED EXAMPLES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Below are three examples of evaluated programmes that promote adolescent girls' empowerment through life skills within the eight dimensions described above and shown in Figures 1–4.[28]

Life skills and mentorship for girls in Ethiopia:

Biruh Tesfa[29] reached 40,000 out-of-school girls, including domestic workers in urban areas in Ethiopia, through sustained and repeated provision of literacy and life skills programming delivered in safe spaces.

Girls were explicitly targeted through a recruitment and participation strategy, and they contributed to curriculum content design. Mentors were supported and appropriately remunerated and used participatory group facilitation techniques. Three to six months' community engagement led to the creation of community-based project advisory committees which provided the safe spaces. Mentors accompanied girls to identified health services in the local community.

An evaluation found that the programme was successful in raising girls' knowledge and use of HIV prevention, health and hygiene services, increased demand for voluntary counselling and testing services, and resulted in improved scores in literacy and arithmetic.

Life skills and sexual and reproductive health and rights for girls in India:

The **Institute of Health Management Pachod (IHMP)** implemented an integrated project for empowering adolescent girls[30] in two districts in Maharashtra state in India.

The project combined explicit targeting of vulnerable married and unmarried adolescent girls (11–19 years old) with club-based life skills and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and rights information through repeated exposure to key messages and leadership and community mobilization training for older adolescents. Engagement with men and boys and communities challenged notions of masculinity, girls' education and marriage. Linkages with primary health-care providers helped identify the health-care needs of vulnerable and isolated married girls.

A programme evaluation showed an increase in the median age of marriage and first birth for participating girls, a reduction in the proportion of married girls in the community, and an increase in the use of contraception and maternal health services.

Gender-transformative life skills for girls in Bangladesh:

The **BALIKA**[31] programme (Bangladeshi Association for Life Skills, Income, and Knowledge for Adolescents) provided adolescent girls with literacy, numeracy, computing and financial skills as well as gender-transformative life skills and livelihoods training.

The programme used an explicit pathway of change towards delaying child marriage, with clear intended outcomes, objectives and goals as well as defined measures of success. The programme provided regularly supervised qualified mentors with scoring and ongoing support to improve the quality of the facilitation. It extensively engaged the community through meetings with key stakeholders (religious leaders, head teachers, etc.) to talk about child marriage, dowries, violence and SRH.

The endline evaluation found that girls in the intervention were less likely to be married and more likely to be enrolled in school, earn an income, consume news and media, play outdoors, have gender-equitable attitudes, and know about SRH, HIV, menstruation and family planning.

Life skills and CSE interventions are crucial to empowering adolescent girls at risk of and affected by child marriage to equip them with the knowledge and skills to effectively making their own informed decisions and choices regarding marriage, education and SRH.

ENDNOTES

1   UNFPA and UNICEF, 'Technical Note on Gender-Transformative Approaches in the Global Programme to End Child Marriage Phase II: A summary for practitioners', UNFPA and UNICEF, New York, 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/media/58196/file>.

2   Boender, Carol, Singh, S, and Belachew, H, 'Technical Note on Life Skills Programmes for Empowering Adolescent Girls: Notes for practitioners on what works', UNICEF/UNFPA <https://www.unicef.org/media/63656/file>.

3   Cornwall, Andrea, 'Women's empowerment. What works?', Journal of International Development, vol. 28, pp. 342–359, 2016, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/jid.3210>.

4   Innovation for Youth at University Berkeley (unpublished) and Kabeer, Naila, 'Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment', Development and Change, vol. 30, no. 3, pp. 435–464, 1999, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125>.

5   Kabeer, Naila, 'Gender equality and women's empowerment: a critical analysis of the third Millennium Development Goal', Gender and Development, vol. 13, no. 1, 2005, <https://www.amherst.edu/system/files/media/0589/Kabeer%25202005.pdf>.

6   UNICEF South Asia, 'Gender Responsive Communication for Development: Guidance, tools and resources', 2018, <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/reports/gender-responsive-communication-development-0>.

7   Temin, Miriam, Amin, Sajeda, Ngo, Thoai D, and Psaki, Stephanie, 'How to give adolescent girls voice, choice, and control', Stanford Social Innovation Review, 2018, <https://ssir.org/articles/entry/how_to_give_adolescent_girls_voice_choice_and_control#>.

8   For further references, see: UNESCO, UNAIDS, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women & WHO, 'International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education: an evidence-informed approach for schools, teachers and health educators', 2018, UNESCO, Paris, <https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/ITGSE_en.pdf>; and UNFPA, 'UNFPA Operational Guidance for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: A focus on human rights and gender', UNFPA, New York, 2014, <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNFPA%20Operational%20Guidance%20for%20CSE%20-Final%20WEB%20Version.pdf>.

9   Boender, Carol, 'A rapid review of life skills programs and curricula', UNICEF and UNFPA (unpublished).

10   UNFPA and UNICEF, 'Technical Note on Gender-Transformative Approaches in the Global Programme to End Child Marriage Phase II: A summary for practitioners', UNFPA and UNICEF, New York, 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/media/58196/file>.

11   World Bank, 'World Development Report. Spotlight 3 The multidimensionality of skills', 2018, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/28340/9781464810961_Spot03.pdf?sequence=24&isAllowed=y>.

12   Innovation for Youth at University Berkeley (unpublished).

13   Boender, Carol, 'A rapid review of life skills programs and curricula', UNICEF and UNFPA (unpublished); and Nasheeda, Aishath, Abdullah, Haslinda Binti, Krauss, Steven Eric, and Ahmed, Nobaya Binti 'A narrative systematic review of life skills education: effectiveness, research gaps and priorities', International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, 1–18, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2018.1479278>.

14   See UNICEF, 'Global Evaluation of Life Skills Education Programmes', final report, p.1, Education for Change and UNICEF, New York, 2012, <https://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/files/UNICEF_GLS_Web.pdf>.

15   Boender, Carol, Singh, S, and Belachew, H, 'Technical Note on Life Skills Programmes for Empowering Adolescent Girls: Notes for practitioners on what works', UNICEF/UNFPA <https://www.unicef.org/media/63656/file>, and associated 22 May 2019 Global Programme webinar notes on life skills (unpublished).

16   Boender, Carol, Singh, S, and Belachew, H, 'Technical Note on Life Skills Programmes for Empowering Adolescent Girls: Notes for practitioners on what works', UNICEF/UNFPA <https://www.unicef.org/media/63656/file>.

17   Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 'A conceptual model of women and girls' empowerment', UNICEF/UNFPA, n.d., <https://docs.gatesfoundation.org/Documents/BMGF_EmpowermentModel.pdf>; and COFEM's Feminist Pocketbook, <https://cofemsocialchange.org/feminist-pocketbook/#1536528086422-50fec3f9-1fb3>.

18   Boender, Carol, Singh, S, and Belachew, H, 'Technical Note on Life Skills Programmes for Empowering Adolescent Girls: Notes for practitioners on what works', UNICEF/UNFPA <https://www.unicef.org/media/63656/file>.

19   Ibid.

20   Ibid.; and Population Council, 'Making the Most of Mentors: Recruitment, Training, and Support of Mentors for Adolescent Girl Programming', Population Council, New York, 2019, <https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/2019PGY_MentorToolkit.pdf>.

21   Ibid.

22   Boender, Carol, Singh, S, and Belachew, H, 'Technical Note on Life Skills Programmes for Empowering Adolescent Girls: Notes for practitioners on what works', UNICEF/UNFPA <https://www.unicef.org/media/63656/file>.

23   Ibid. and Blake, Sarah, and Temin, Miriam, 'More Than a Backdrop: Understanding the role of communities in programming for adolescent girls', Population Council, New York, 2019, <https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/2019PGY_CommunityActionGuide.pdf>.

24   Ibid.

25   Glennester, Rachel, Walsh, Claire, and Diaz-Martin, Lucia, 'A practical guide to measuring women and girls' empowerment in impact evaluations', J-Pal: Abdul-Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, n.d., <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/practical-guide-measuring-women-and-girls-empowerment-impact-evaluations>.

26   Boender, Carol, 'A rapid review of life skills programs and curricula', UNICEF and UNFPA (unpublished); Boender, Carol, Singh, S, and Belachew, H, 'Technical Note on Life Skills Programmes for Empowering Adolescent Girls: Notes for practitioners on what works', UNICEF/UNFPA <https://www.unicef.org/media/63656/file>; and Innovation for Youth at University Berkeley (unpublished).

27   Ibid.

28   Boender, Carol, 'Good practice case studies on life skills for adolescent girls' empowerment', UNICEF/UNFPA (unpublished).

29   Erulkar, Annabel, Ferede, Abebaw, Girma, Woldemariam, and Ambelu, Worku, 'Evaluation of "Biruh tesfa" (bright future) program for vulnerable girls in Ethiopia', Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies, vol. 8, no. 2, 2013, pp. 182–192, <doi:10.1080/17450128.2012.736645>.

30   Girls Not Brides, 'Integrated projects for empowering adolescent girls', case study, 2015, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/resource-centre/case-study-integrated-project-for-empowering-adolescent-girls>.

31   Population Council, 'BALIKA: Empowering girls to delay child marriage in Bangladesh', 2016, <https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/2016PGY_BALIKA_EndlineResults.pdf>.